

McKee, A. (2003). *Textual Analysis: A beginner's guide*. London, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. ISBN 0-7619-4993-3 (159 pp.)

The best part of Alan McKee's volume 'Textual analysis: A beginner's guide' is the cover. A bearded, longhaired grandfatherly figure is portrayed as a couch potato slouched in front of the television set. The man, holding the remote control device, is sitting with a beautiful baby on his arm. It is simply a lovely picture that makes me smile every time I happened to glance at the book on my desk.

The book is a beginner's guide consisting of 6 chapters. The entire book is a 'game' of question and reply. The chapters' titles are formulated in the form of questions, and in the chapters bold printed questions that could have been posed by students (And that would mean, exactly ... ?) are addressed by the author. This formula, plus the informal 'natural language'-tone of the author supports the idea of a guide that can easily be used in educational settings. A large number of illustrative examples are provided in order to elaborate on and explain the points made. Another characteristic of the book is the availability of several 'end-of-chapter' items. Each chapter (except for the last one) ends with three sections. The first 'and the main points again' is a summary of the arguments presented in the chapter. The second 'questions and exercises' provides feedback to students and other readers in expanding the points made, whereas the third 'textual analysis project' is aimed at leading readers through a complete work of textual analysis in the course of the book. Also worth mentioning are the grey colored boxes in each chapter, containing case studies in which a published study is summarized and commented on. Although functional, it is somewhat odd that the boxes are rather large and cover sometimes more than three pages. Another remarkable point is that a box discussing the case study (plus some suggestions for further reading) makes up the entire final chapter.

The objective of the book is to explain the logic behind post-structuralist textual analysis. This type of textual analysis is aimed at the reconstruction of sense making practices. According to the author, the conduct of textual analysis involves making an 'educated guess' about the most likely interpretations that might be given to that text (p. 1). Texts are defined as 'something that we make meaning from' (p. 4) and examples provided by the author are films, television programmes, magazines, advertisements, clothes, and graffiti. McKee positions himself explicitly as a post-structuralist. A post-structuralist approach acknowledges that all cultures interpret the world differently and that these are equally 'right' or 'wrong'. It is acknowledged that people from different cultures experience reality differently. The author contrasts post-structuralism against structuralism on the one hand, of which the basic tenet is that

underneath cultural differences common structures can be identified, and against realism on the other hand, in which the idea is advocated that only one reality exists.

When it comes to the actual conduct of a textual analysis, students might still feel uncertain about how to do this. As stated, throughout the book a 'textual analysis project' is provided, aimed at leading readers through a complete work of textual analysis. Apart from advises on how to formulate a research question and to search for relevant texts and 'intertexts' – other texts in the series, the genre of texts, publicly circulated texts that are explicitly linked to the text that is examined, and the wider public context in which a text is circulated – no real guidelines are given on how to proceed while analyzing all this material and how to report on it. The author does present a few 'useful tricks' that are helpful in order to uncover how sense-making practices work. These include exnomination (aimed at identifying the normality, the standard in a culture based on which everything else can be judged), commutation test (a thought experiment where one element of a text is replaced with a similar but different part of culture, for instance swapping male and female roles), and structuring absences (the identification of representations that are systematically excluded in texts).

Chapter 5, entitled 'Can't we make it a bit more scientific?', discusses how and to what extent post-structuralist textual analysis can be regarded as a methodology. According to McKee, textual analysis is a methodology, but not in the sense that it includes a standard procedure. McKee states: "There are two aspects of (post-structuralist) textual analysis that are particularly unscientific. First, it doesn't produce quantitative knowledge (numbers). [...] And, second, this methodology isn't 'iterable' (repeatable)" (118). McKee stresses that the latter is caused because "... researchers will draw on their own knowledge of the culture within which the texts circulate as they attempt to guess the likely interpretations of those texts. This methodology is part of the humanities more than the sciences." (118). The author does not disqualify textual analysis as less valuable than other more scientific methodologies, as it has generated historical knowledge and knowledge in the field of literature. In addition, the author argues more fundamentally that 'objective science' reflects a specific culture that represents reality in particular ways: "... from a post-structuralist perspective it's not the only true, correct, accurate representation of the world. Forms of knowledge production which are more 'scientific' – using numbers to quantify data and using replicable forms of analysis – aren't more 'objective' than methodologies like textual analysis" (123). Here illustrations are provided from DNA-research, plant biology, and physics.

In the last part of the book content analysis, defined in a rather traditional way as ‘the most common form of quantitative textual analysis’ (p. 127), and semiotics are (briefly) discussed as methodologies close to textual analysis. Here again the emphasis is on the fact that either content analysis or semiotics should be considered as more scientific than textual analysis.

The book is fun and easy reading as the illustrations are varied and numerous and the language is not very academic. It remains to be seen, however, whether the principles described in this beginner’s guide offer students enough guidelines for the conduct of an actual textual analysis project.

*Department of Communication
University of Nijmegen*

Martine van Selm